

Sarah Shelton

Dr. Warren

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Feed Their Heads:

Why Novels are Essential in the ELA Classroom

Remember Lennie and George? Hatchet? Scout? You met them in the novels you read for junior high or high school. They helped you feel what the Great Depression was and how tragic friendship can be, showed you how to survive and that you can face the problems eating you up inside, taught you that life isn't fair but to stand up anyway. But Dorothy didn't just skip beside you down a yellow brick road unfurling inside your imagination; she actually stretched your brain, laid down new pathways, exercised areas you didn't use otherwise. By sticking with Huck the whole way down that river, you learned more than literary terms and how to spot a theme; your brain learned how to follow a complicated story through to the end, how to pick out patterns and peel back layers, how to think its way through a complex puzzle, and how to stay engaged with a problem that took more than a few minutes to solve. These guys taught you what it is to be human while getting your brain in shape to engage with the world.

Imagine, then, never having met them at school.

Because your children and future employees might not get the chance to.

Administrators and curriculum directors see dropping the novel as necessary for meeting the demands of the state's newest standardized test. Students might still get excerpts, a passage here and there to expose them to multiple texts while targeting and drilling specific skills. But

once all classrooms are calibrated to meet the new standards, children may make it through high school without the teacher every taking them through the deep-text journey of a novel cover to cover (or, with the rise of the e-reader, 1% to 100%). Administration is right that there isn't room for the novel once the new requirements become routine, but they're wrong to assume that cutting down on novel study or cutting it altogether is what's best for our students, our state, and our nation. Losing the novel in the classroom will mean starving our children's brains, stunting their growth into the engaged, well-rounded, and valuable citizens our country depends on each generation becoming.

In 2007, Texas adopted new standards for what is taught in our public schools. Called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, these TEKS now drive the decisions that administrators, curriculum writers, and teachers make about what to include and what to leave out of every subject taught. In the core classes (English, social studies, science, and math) these TEKS do a little bit more; they also comprise what will be on the End of Course (or STAAR) exams. The STAAR isn't just another test—it's what those of us in the education industry call High Stakes Testing. The stakes: student graduation, school funding, and teacher jobs. Teachers, therefore, can no longer ignore the TEKS if they feel that the state has its priorities wrong. Even those of us still doggedly holding on to the novel as a necessity in the English Language Arts classroom will soon have to relent and let it go in favor of excerpts or else risk our own jobs and our students' success on their yearly tests.

Those standing behind the TEKS believe that it is essential to cover the wide range of skills set out for each grade level, requiring English teachers to teach an average of ten genres each year. At the junior level, where I teach, we not only have to introduce students to the entire breadth of American Literature for the first and only time in high school, but we also have to

teach rhetoric—a subject that needs its own class altogether. On top of that, students are required to write a poem, a short story, a drama script, a persuasive essay, an analytical essay, an expository essay, and a procedural text. Students are required to read non-fiction, short stories, drama, poetry, procedural texts, expository texts, speeches, and letters. Students are required to go through the complete research process and develop a presentation and essay. Students are required to work in groups, to listen in order to take notes and to receive information. Students are required to learn academic and SAT vocabulary. Students are required to learn adverbial and prepositional phrases, to create complex and compound-complex sentences. And the list goes on to include far more than even the best of teachers could include in a single year.

In a nutshell, teachers must put the students through their paces in order to train them to take the state's tests at the end of each year. This type of check-it-off, get-it-done-and-move-on curriculum necessitates excerpts and short stories in place of novels, and those who support this curriculum believe that excerpts can get the novel's job done just as well. But while teachers can certainly teach the same types of skills (characterization, theme, rhetoric, etc.) with shorter works, they can't simulate the type of deep-text diving our students need and that novel-length works provide at this critical developmental stage. Certainly, they'll still learn to read—or decode—on the surface level. But moving on to what Kelly Gallagher calls “higher intellectual lifting (e.g., evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing)” becomes increasingly difficult without practicing these skills on suitably complex texts.

Our students indulge in a fast-fact lifestyle. They gorge on information via the internet as if visiting an all-you-can-eat buffet. Though they now have easier access to information than we ever dreamed of as teens, and though they can fill up with as much of it as they want to while trying new things, they aren't fueling their brains with the proper diet at this crucial juncture in

their development. As we begin to bring the fast-fact pattern into the classroom—read the excerpt or short test reading, answer questions, move on to next reading—we take away the one place students can set aside television and Google’s instant gratification and engage in activities that exercise and feed those evolving parts of the brain. Even worse, we reinforce the very pattern of information-gathering that is not meeting their developmental needs. In other words, as Gallagher points out in his book, *Readicide: How Schools are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It*, we are actually “starving” parts of our students’ brains. “When schools remove novels from the students’ curriculum and replace challenging books with shorter pieces and worksheets, they are denying students the foundational reading experiences for developing those regions of the brain that enable them to think deeply.”

In *Endangered Minds: Why Children Can’t Think—and What We Can Do about It*, Jane Healy adds that “if the child’s developmental needs are not met, we may actually close down some of [their] developmental windows.” Once those developmental windows close, it is near to impossible to rewire the now-developed brain to work or think another way. Following a curriculum that leaves no room for novels, or even for students to sit and think on a problem for more than a single period, means teachers are reaching up and slamming the developmental window down with their own hands when they should be wedging it open with as many books as they can for as long as possible.

Administrators might point out that we can still wedge the window open by encouraging students to read at home. But the majority of kids aren’t participating in the types of activities that push and challenge their brains on their own time. Instead, they prefer the fast-fact internet diet of instant gratification. In fact, for many students, school is the only place where they have access to books, and for many more it’s the only place where they are challenged to stretch and

exercise their thinking skills by reading a book all the way through. When we take away full-novel study and replace it with excerpts, we are, in a sense, replacing a training powerlifter's barbell with five-pound aerobic hand-weights and expecting him to one day win gold at the Olympics.

At this point, the problem is no longer a question of what we want to be happening in our public schools, but what we want for our nation's future. If they aren't feeding the brain at home, and we aren't feeding the brain at school, how do we expect them to grow into the type of citizens this nation needs? Healy even asks, "Are we going to have an entire generation of people who cannot manage their own behavior, manage their world, plan ahead, reflect on abstract ideas, or relate appropriately to moral and social and ethical issues?" When studying a nationwide decline in voluntary reading—a life-long habit that ELA classrooms should ideally instill in students—the National Endowment for the Arts even concluded that "the decline in reading...parallels a larger retreat from participation in civic and cultural life."

Certainly, teachers have a responsibility to meet the requirements (the TEKS) that the state sets out. But to assume that the state got it right, to not question the relevance of standards and tests that negate a practice essential to our youth's development is to sacrifice our students' futures to the path of least resistance. Students need us to take them beneath the surface of a novel. To help them walk the long and winding road through the themes and characterizations and plots and settings to find the ideas at the heart of what the author set out on the page. That journey is a worthwhile trip to take students on; a journey that teaches them how to *think*.

Certainly, some English teachers abuse the novel. They spend months on one book, give constant streams of comprehension-check worksheets and plot-question quizzes and tests, and ask students to memorize facts from the text instead of diving deep to where the real learning is.

But this laborious brand of “how” some are teaching the novel is a house-keeping problem; a whole other can of worms better handled by human resources than curriculum directors. By banning novels for all because of the sins of a few, administration isn’t just slapping a Band-Aid on the wrong wound; they’re amputating the wrong limb, doing irreparable harm to student development and, consequently, our society as a whole.

Ray Bradbury has a famous quote posted on many a poster in many an English teacher’s classroom: “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.” In a similar vein, perhaps we don’t need a Hollywood-brand apocalyptic virus to turn future generations into zombies either. We can just let the state run brain-starved students through a novel-deficient curriculum. The effect, I fear, will be eerily the same.

Works Cited

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